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Two stapelias: *Stapelia gigantea* and *S. schinzii* var. *angolensis*

By Colin C. Walker

Stapelia is now considered to be a modest sized genus with 28 species currently recognised (Bruyns, 2005) and widely distributed throughout southern Africa south of Angola, Zambia and Mozambique, being most diverse in South Africa. Here just two of these species are considered: *Stapelia gigantea* and *S. schinzii* var. *angolensis*, which sit at opposite ends of the scale in terms of flower size. Both have flowered well for me in the past and hence come highly recommended.

Within this genus the claim to fame of *Stapelia gigantea* is that it is, as heralded by its name, truly a giant. The species was first described in 1877 by the renowned Kew botanist Nicholas Edward Brown, who called it "The goliath of the genus" (Brown, 1877). Brown's accolade of "goliath" is well deserved, since this species has THE largest flower not only of any stapeliad but also of its family the Apocynaceae. It proudly sits amongst the biggest flowers in the whole of the plant kingdom to rival other giants such as *Rafflesia*!

Plants of *S. gigantea* are typical of *Stapelia* having robust, prominently 4-angled, erect stems to 30cm long that are shortly pubescent and green mottled with purple if grown in full sun. In cultivation it grows relatively quickly and branches freely from the base, hence forming clumps up

to 1m – or exceptionally 3m – in diameter. It presents few problems for the grower but as with all stapeliads mealy bugs can be problematic, so diligence is required to prevent damage from this pest.

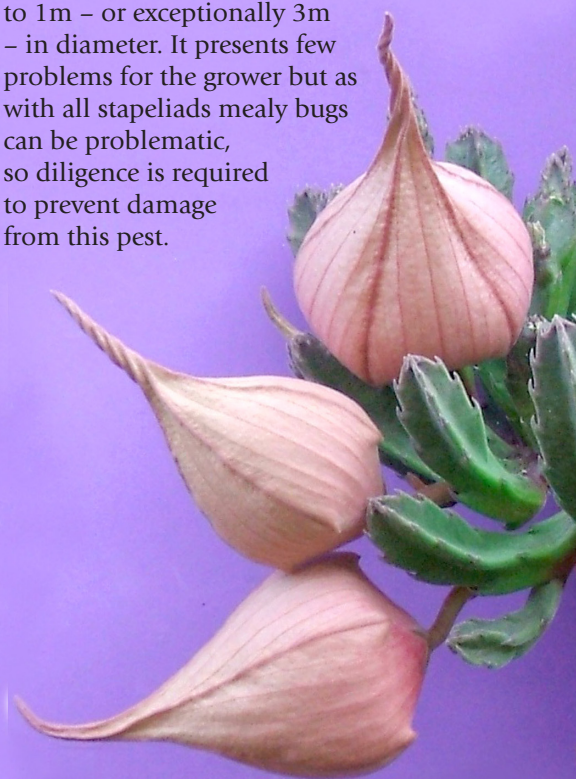


Fig.1 Buds of *Stapelia gigantea*

The bud has a slender tapering beak (Fig. 1). Its flowers range in size from 20-40cm diameter, with my plant (Fig. 2) having flowers about 30cm in diameter. The open flower has long tapering corolla lobes radiating from a very shallow tube. The inner surface is adorned with prominent, irregular, raised reddish ridges and is covered with fine purple hairs which

are longest along the margins. As expected for a stapeliad, the scent is unpleasant, being the typical smell of rotten meat or dead carrion. The odour is not as strong as you might expect for such a large flower and many much smaller-flowered apocynads have far more pungent, unpleasant scents compared to this giant.

This species has one of the widest distributional ranges of any *Stapelia*. It was first collected in 1858 in what is now KwaZulu-Natal, but it is now known to occur over much of southern Africa: northern South Africa, Swaziland, Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia (Bruyns, 2005). This makes it the most northerly occurring species of its genus. Surprisingly for such a widespread and variable species it has accumulated relatively few synonyms but there are some, the most important of which is *Stapelia nobilis*. *Stapelia gigantea* grows in a variety of habitats including rocky slopes, coastal sand dunes and unusually for a succulent, alongside mangrove swamps (Bruyns, 2005).

The closest relative to *S. gigantea* is *S. unicornis* which has a much more limited distribution and occurs principally in the Lebombo Mountains where South Africa, Swaziland and Mozambique meet. The distribution range of these species overlaps across most



Fig.2 *Stapelia gigantea* flowering in a 12.5cm diameter pot.

of the limited range of *S. unicornis*, but there are apparently no records of hybridisation between the two. The distinctive pale green colour and long hairs of the stems of *S. unicornis* make it easily distinguishable, whilst the flowers are significantly smaller, usually being only 10cm across – but exceptionally can be up to 13cm. The slender tapering corolla lobes of *S. gigantea* easily separate it from the other large-flowering species such as *S. gettcliffei*, *S. grandiflora* and *S. hirsuta* (Bruyns, 2005).

In contrast to *S. gigantea*, *S. schinzii* has a more limited distribution occurring only in Namibia and southern Angola. *Stapelia schinzii* var. *schinzii* is quite widespread in Namibia whilst var. *angolensis* occurs over a more restricted range in southern Angola and northern



Fig. 3 *Stapelia schinzii* var. *angolensis* flowering in a 12.5 cm diameter pot.

being only 7 cm across in my plant, although these can be up to 14 cm in diameter. The flowers have the typical transverse ridges of most *Stapelia* flowers, but unlike those of *S. gigantea* these are somewhat shiny and adorned with very dark purple hairs on the edges of the corolla lobes, hence greatly adding to their attractiveness.

Being a smaller, more compact plant with shiny flowers makes *S. schinzii* var. *angolensis* more attractive than *S. gigantea* in my opinion. In my experience and certainly here in the UK at least it is also much rarer in cultivation, giving it collector appeal. Added interest also comes from the fact that it is

Namibia. This latter variety was first described in 1969 from the Chela Mountains of southern Angola, hence its name, but has since been discovered in Namibia. Here in the Baynes Mountains it is apparently not uncommon, where it grows in very shallow soil in rock crevices and on ledges along cliff edges, usually completely in the open (Bruyns, 2005).

Stapelia schinzii var. *angolensis* is a smaller growing plant than *S. gigantea*. The habit of its stems is more loosely spreading and sometimes almost prostrate. This growth form makes it ideal for growing in a hanging pot with stems and flowers hanging over the pot edge (Fig. 3). Flowers are also much smaller than those of *S. gigantea*,

only one of two species of *Stapelia* currently recorded from Angola. This second Angolan species, *Stapelia parvula*, was also first described in 1969; it too has small flowers, hence its name. It is rarer in the wild than *S. schinzii* var. *angolensis* and I have never seen it in cultivation, so it is a plant worth tracking down.

References

- Brown, N.E. (1877) *Stapelia gigantea*. *Gard. Chron. n.s.* 7: 684, Fig. 112.
- Bruyns, P.V. (2005) *Stapeliads of Southern Africa and Madagascar*. 2 vols. Umdaus Press, Hatfield, Pretoria.

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